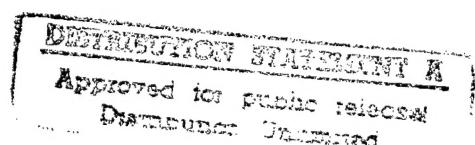


**Operational Leadership in Vietnam:  
General William Depuy vs. Lieutenant General Victor Krulak  
or  
Attrition Vice Pacification**

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## Introduction

The men who served as America's operational leaders during our involvement in the Vietnam conflict all learned the tenets of their profession while serving as tactical leaders during World War II. For the most part, they were honorable men who believed, without question, in the invincibility of the American military-industrial complex. They were convinced that the aggressiveness, resourcefulness and courage of the American fighting man coupled with the vast resources and superior technology of our industrial base would prevail over any adversary. They had experienced the thrill of victory over the Axis coalition and had played no small part in helping to achieve that great triumph. They had continued to succeed at every level during their climb through the military hierarchy until they reached senior operational command and staff billets in the Southeast Asia theatre of operations. They were the best of the best. They would make short work of the communist insurgents and once again validate the strength and power of the United States. They failed. Why?

The methodology of this paper is to examine the leadership of two generals who served in prominent positions during the Vietnam War: General William Depuy, United States Army, and General Victor Krulak, United States Marine Corps. They were but two of many generals who served in that war and neither served as the overall commander in Vietnam. However, both served in critical operational positions and their theories and decision about how the war should be prosecuted presents the analyst with a fascinating vehicle with which to study the operational facets of the conflict. The purpose of this comparison is to draw some general conclusions about why the senior leadership in

Vietnam failed at the operational level and how future leaders can benefit from past mistakes.

### **Thesis**

The operational center of gravity in all counterinsurgency conflicts is the population of the host nation. The adversary that wins the support and confidence of the people will ultimately prevail. In Vietnam, there were two distinct theories about how to gain the confidence of the people. The Army leadership, with the exception of Special Forces detachments, believed that a war of attrition would win. Army leaders argued that by crushing the communists on the battlefield the South Vietnamese population would support the government because the government proved it could protect them militarily. The Army method emphasized overwhelming firepower and superior technology.

The Marine Corps concept called for a strategy of pacification and stabilization. They focused on pacifying the hamlets, stabilizing the heavily populated seacoast regions and then, with the enemy denied popular support, attacking the conventional elements of the insurgent forces.

Generals Depuy and Krulak served as the chief architects for each of their respective services' strategies. By examining their disparate philosophies, the lack of unity of effort at the operational echelon becomes evident.

The thesis of this paper proposes that Krulak's theory of pacification was the more appropriate method for Vietnam. The failure of Depuy, as the chief planner, was due to an inability to recognize the different principles of counterinsurgent warfare and to orchestrate the operational design accordingly.

## **Background**

### **General William E. Depuy**

General Depuy commanded an infantry battalion in the European theatre of operations during World War II. He served in the usual command and staff positions required to progress in rank after the war. In 1961, he attended the British Imperial Defense College. Depuy spent a large part of his formative years in Europe and learned a great deal, first from his enemy, the Germans, and then from an ally, the British. These influences convinced him that superior firepower in conjunction with aggressive maneuver equated to battlefield success. In 1964, he assumed duties as the Operations Director (J3) Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV). He later commanded the 1st Infantry Division where he immediately put his theory of attrition warfare into highly visible practice. Daniel Ellsberg captured the essence of Depuy's philosophy during an interview with him at the General's command post in the III Corps area of operations: "The solution in Vietnam is more bombs, more shells, more napalm. . . until the other side cracks and gives up." (Sheehan p. 619)

The status of Depuy's reputation within the Army hierarchy is easily validated by the importance of the positions he held after his service in Vietnam. During his tenure as the assistant vice chief of staff of the Army, he was instrumental in establishing the program management system as a basis for force planning development. His final assignment as Commanding General of Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) placed him as the top Army leader in charge of how the nation's land forces would fight its future battles. Ironically, the most significant assignment, relevant to this paper, was the

one immediately following his command in Vietnam. In 1967, General Depuy assumed the position of Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency to the Secretary of Defense (SACSA). The name of the man he replaced as SACSA. . . LtGen Victor H. "Brute" Krulak!

Lieutenant General Victor H. Krulak

LtGen Krulak commanded the 2nd Marine Parachute Battalion in the Pacific theatre of operations during World War II. Prior to WWII, he established a reputation as an innovative thinker, while serving as an intelligence officer in China. He observed the Japanese methods of amphibious warfare and his detailed reports on their landing craft led to the American version called the Higgins boat. The Higgins boat became the famous LCVP assault boats of Tarawa and Iwo Jima. After WWII, Krulak continued to look ahead as he pushed for the adoption of the helicopter as a means to execute vertical envelopment. Krulak was greatly influenced by a number of Marine leaders who had extensive experience in counter-insurgencies(CI). The most prominent of who may have been General Merritt A. "Red Mike" Edson. Edson founded the 1st Marine Raider battalion and fought with them on Guadalcanal where he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. Previously, Edson had served in Nicaragua where he fought the guerrilla leader Augusto Sandino. While in Nicaragua, he established the Coco patrols, a variation of which Krulak would institute in Vietnam almost 40 years later as the Combined Action Platoons (CAP). Edson thought so highly of Krulak that he wrote, ". . . he (Krulak) is one of the brightest and most efficient officers that we have. . . he is so far outstanding in comparison to most of his contemporaries that they do not like him." (Hoffman p. 271)

Krulak also had admirers in high places at the national level, most notably, the President of the United States, John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Krulak and Kennedy had met during WWII in the Pacific and the President thought highly of Krulak as a military thinker. Early in the Vietnam War, Krulak went there as part of a fact finding mission. He returned without a full assessment. By the time Krulak realized the military was on the wrong course, Kennedy was dead and Krulak was speaking to deaf ears in President Johnson. As Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency to the Secretary of Defense, Krulak attempted to promulgate traditional Marine concepts for dealing with insurgencies learned from experiences in the Caribbean and Central America. Later, as CG of Fleet Marine Force Pacific, he tried to implement his "ink-blot" theory of pacification. The central element of this theory proposed that the Marines would systematically spread out from their three major enclaves along the seacoast where 92 percent of the population lived. Once these populated areas were joined by the spread of "ink-blot" pacification, the insurgent forces would be isolated without a popular support base and forced to spend themselves militarily or seek peace at the negotiation table. The operating mechanism of this effort was the work of the Combined Action Program. Squad sized elements would live and fight in the villages along side Popular Force Platoons. In Francis West's book, The Village, Marines demonstrated that by personal example and commitment they could influence the local populace to defend themselves and respect the efforts of their American allies. Krulak acknowledged that this technique was expensive in terms of manpower and time but argued that the ends would justify the means. As we will discuss in organizational

design analysis, the political risks were judged to be great by the National Command Authority.

### Net Assessment

In the net assessment of these leaders, General Depuy and General Krulak both exhibited all of the characteristics found in successful tactical leaders and most of the traits sought in operational leaders. Captain Barney Rubel (USN) in his paper on operational level leadership writes that the vision of operational leaders must encompass two functions. The first is the ability to recognize the kind of fight that you are in. The second is that the operational leader must see the road to victory. I submit that Krulak's vision was clearer than Depuy's in these two functions and will attempt to validate this premise in the analysis segment of this document.

### Analysis

In order to structure this assessment of Depuy's war of attrition versus Krulak's war of pacification, it is useful to study these conflicting strategies within the context of two operational models. The first schematic deals with the factors of operational design. Operational design provides a framework for the commander and his staff that ensures coherence and synchronization of effort. The second model examines the strategies in question from the perspective of the tenets of military operations other than war (MOOTW). MOOTW encompasses the principles of security, legitimacy, unity of effort, restraint, perseverance and objective (SLURPO).

## Operational Design

### 1. Guidance

General Westmoreland's guidance to his subordinate commanders, simply put, was to engage the enemy's main force units (NVA and VC) and destroy them by means of maneuver and superior firepower. This policy agreed with the traditional "American way of making war." This method focuses on quick decisions, heavy emphasis on mass and firepower and rapid closure of the conflict. General Depuy, first as Westmoreland's chief planner (J3) and then as his star executor during his tenure as the commanding general of the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division, wholly espoused his mentor's policy of attrition:

"His (General Westmoreland's) philosophy, with which I entirely agreed, was that American units were there to fight the enemy big regiments that were tearing up the ARVN and destroying the pacification effort. . . . It was clear to me that he wanted me to get cracking. So, as soon as I got there, I moved the division around a lot. I even moved it sometimes when I really didn't have very good intelligence. . . . I wanted a division that could pile on . . . using lots of firepower." (Depuy 140)

As commanding general of Fleet Marine Forces Pacific (FMFPAC), Krulak was not in a position to give guidance. However, he was an immensely influential leader not only in theatre but also in Washington. He went around Westmoreland, through McNamara, right to President Johnson. His argument for pacification over attrition was founded in precedent from the Marine Corps perspective. Marine Corps doctrine as captured in their Small Wars Manual based its validity on decades of Marine Corps campaigns in Central America and the Caribbean. They clearly saw Vietnam as another

chapter in their history of pacification warfare. Ultimately, Krulak failed to sway Johnson because of the next component of operational design: desired end state.

## **2. Desired End State**

The desired end state from President Johnson's perspective entailed keeping Vietnam in the American sphere of influence by means of a rapid closure of hostilities with the fewest possible US casualties and without provoking the USSR or Red China. If these conditions are examined from the operational factors of time, space and forces, it is easy to see why Johnson would prefer Depuy's plan over Krulak's strategy. Depuy believed that the rapid maneuver of concentrated forces to catch the enemy in his base camps and destroy him with superior firepower could provide Johnson with a relatively quick, decisive victory. Krulak's theory of protracted guerrilla warfare conducted by large numbers of decentralized forces in conjunction with the bombing and mining of key strategic facilities in the north frightened Johnson. He saw that approach as long in terms of time, costly in terms of forces and potential casualties and risky in terms of space if the USSR or China might intervene with the fight taken to North Vietnam. The fact that Depuy's way could not win in this environment while Krulak's might was apparently lost on the President.

## **3. Identification of the Enemy Center of Gravity (COG)**

One of the root causes of the operational leaders' failure in Vietnam rested in their inability to correctly identify or agree upon the enemy COG. Even today, at the prestigious Naval War College, experts disagree on what was the enemy COG in Vietnam. On page 7 of NWC 4104, Professor Milan Vego states, "in MOOTW, the enemy's COG is

usually more difficult to identify . . . . Hence, counterinsurgency warfare is generally more difficult to conduct than against a regular military force.” He further goes on to say, “The United States focused on the destruction of the Viet Cong, not the actual COG, namely the North Vietnamese army.” He perfectly captures the disconnect here between Krulak’s pacification and Depuy’s attrition. Both parties were considering different elements of the enemy infrastructure as vital, therefore, their focus was asymmetrical.

#### 4. Operational Scheme

The operational scheme or idea translates the commander’s vision into practical application. This factor deals with the methods of how force will be applied. Here is where the proponents of attrition and the champions of pacification differ most obviously.

“. . .the original purpose and mission for US troops was this third mission (search and destroy). All this was not without controversy. The Chief of Staff of the Army thought he was sending the 1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Division to practice counterinsurgency--that is clearing and securing, civic action and psychological operations. We did not do a good job of explaining this to incoming divisions. For example, the Marines came in and started securing, clearing and practicing pacification under the tutelage of Lieutenant General Krulak, the Marine Counterinsurgent. Soon, of course, they were drawn into a brutal war with the North Vietnamese army just south of the DMZ.”(Depuy 138-9)

## **Principles of MOOTW**

### **1. Security**

The principle of security involves force protection, civilian defense and intelligence development and safeguarding. In counterinsurgent warfare, proper security necessitates a close interaction between troops and the local populace. The CAP program, established by Krulak and accurately portrayed by West in The Village, superbly illustrated the bond that develops between protectors and protected once credibility is gained. No less an authority than NVA General Vo Nguyen Giap recognized the importance of gaining the support of the people, “Protracted war requires a whole ideological struggle among the people . . . . They hide us, protect us, feed us and tend our wounded.” (Krulak 189) Depuy, on the other hand, remained against employing forces in this maneuver: “I have always felt that regular US Army troop units are peculiarly ill-suited for the purpose of security operations where they must be in close contact with the people. They can, of course, conduct clearing operations and are perfectly suited for search and destroy.” (Depuy 133)

### **2. Legitimacy**

Legitimacy may be the most difficult principle and the most important to any counterinsurgent effort. Larry Cable writes eloquently on the subject and emphasizes that only the people can ultimately decide who has the legitimate authority to claim their allegiance. Jeffrey Race lists the most common elements that the populace looks for when determining legitimacy: land reform, reduced taxation, draft policies, and personal protection. Destroying the enemy forces holds little interest for the common man and may in fact alienate him if in order to achieve the destruction of the enemy the government or

it's allies also destroy the cities, farms and villages in the process. Again, Krulak's theory of pacification best serves the interests of legitimacy.

### 3. Unity of Effort

The principle of unity of effort requires that all means are directed towards a common purpose. This entails all efforts at every level. In The Nightingale's Song, Robert Timberg describes the frustrations tactical leaders felt not only about the adversities of combat itself but also concerning the policies they felt hamstrung their efforts such as restrictive rules of engagement. Eric Bergerud details the problems that different agendas between the host nation and allies must compromise on to achieve unity of effort. Where competing philosophies, such as attrition and pacification, grate against each other, there is likely to be a significant disunity of effort.

### 4. Restraint

In describing the principle of restraint in MOOTW, words like prudence, judicious and balance are frequently used to soften the impact of force. Lack of restraint also leads directly to lack of legitimacy. The conflict between attrition and pacification are glaring here in their methods of employing combat power.

John Paul Vann, an acknowledged expert on the counterinsurgent war in Vietnam, was one of the few leaders who actually commanded at both the tactical and operational levels in Vietnam. Before his death in 1972 from a helicopter crash, Vann had served there almost without interruption since 1962. He was an ardent advocate of pacification and held a considerable degree of influence. The very best quote I have ever heard about the use of force in guerrilla warfare and the degree of restraint that should be used in

wielding it is attributed to Vann: “This is a political war and it calls for discrimination in killing. The best weapon for killing would be a knife, but I’m afraid we can’t do it that way. The worst is an airplane. The next is artillery. Barring a knife, the best is a rifle--you know who you are killing.” (Sheehan 317)

Daniel Ellsberg, a close friend and disciple of Vann’s strategic theories, attributed American proclivity to employ massive strategic aerial and artillery barrages to an inherently American attitude towards waging war. “Since World War II, the United States has held a widespread belief in the efficacy and acceptability of strategic bombardment, aimed at the will of the opponents via his industrial and population resources.” In fact, Ellsberg goes on to warn allied nations who contemplate requesting US military support that they better understand the conditions of receiving such aid. “If you invite us to do your hard fighting for you, then you get bombing and heavy shelling along with our troops.” (Ellsberg 1-3)

Obviously, Vann described Krulak’s theory of pacification in terms of discriminate use of combat power while Ellsberg captured Depuy’s penchant for massive firepower.

##### **5. Perseverance**

In conducting counterinsurgency operations, Americans must be prepared to engage in a protracted war measured in small gains. This tests the national will and the American way of fighting. The Vietnamese had been fighting the Japanese, the French and each other for almost 30 years before the Americans arrived in force. Leaders like Depuy came in and planned for the quick decisive victory. Strategists like Krulak recognized that

insurgencies take a long time to evolve through the stages of conflict and a longer time to defeat them.

## 6. Objective

The concept of the objective remains basically the same whether one defines it within the framework of operational design, principles of war or principles of MOOTW. All processes call for the commander to define in his guidance a clearly articulated and achievable objective. This can be particularly difficult in CI and proved especially difficult in Vietnam. A way of determining if efforts are on course with the desired goal is to establish measurements of effectiveness (MOE). Since the adherents of attrition focused their objective on the destruction of the enemy force, enemy body count became the accepted MOE that Depuy briefed to Westmoreland to denote progress. Krulak found this totally counterproductive: "The raw figure of VC killed . . . can be a dubious index of success since, if their killing is accompanied by the devastation of friendly areas, we may end up having done more harm than good." (Sheehan 636)

To find a recent example of successful US participation in counterinsurgency warfare, one only has to study the results of the war in El Salvador. Colonel(Ret) John Waghelstein (USA) describes the National Campaign Plan he helped to develop as the USMILGRP commander which clearly articulates the stated objective and the measures of success used to determine effectiveness. Indicators such as amnesty programs, civic action programs, increased economic growth, increased agricultural yield, increased government patrol activity, decreased guerrilla movement, improved HUMINT intelligence data and enhanced community involvement all equate to gained popular support and the positive

direction of the counterinsurgent effort. No where is enemy body count discussed in his document. Another validation of Krulak's pacification strategy.

### **Conclusion**

As stated in the body of this paper, General Depuy and General Krulak both stand as remarkable leaders deserving a place with the outstanding military figures of this nation. Proven and experienced warriors who possessed keen intellect, unquestioned integrity and absolute commitment, they differed not in ethos but in perspective. Products of the generation who won World War II, this fundamental experience as young officers indelibly shaped their perspective on how to prosecute war at the operational level. Depuy's experience on the conventional battlefield's of Europe and Krulak's adventures with the Marine Parachute battalion in the Pacific and his exposure to veterans of previous guerrilla campaigns molded the way they thought as general officers. In the chapter that history will remember as Vietnam, I believe Krulak's philosophy would have better served the interests of the American effort.

As I researched this paper and bounced ideas back and forth in hindsight, an intriguing supposition began to tickle my imagination. Studying the demographics and geography of South Vietnam, what if the Marines had been deployed in the southern provinces and along the seacoast? That is where the population was most dense and the riverine operations comfortable to Marines were located. The Army could then fight in the northern provinces and along the western borders where the NVA concentrated its forces.

Theoretically, a combination of pacification and attrition might have worked. The take away here is for the operational commander to ensure he employs his forces not only

where they are comfortable but also where they are best suited to achieve maximum effectiveness.

Lastly, one can never forget Herr Clausewitz. His principle of the critical interrelationship between the government, the military and the people, known as the Trinity is immensely appropriate to the student of counterinsurgency. As we enter an era of expected increase in regard to this mission, let us remember the lessons of Vietnam and execute them in the example of El Salvador. The tactical leaders of El Salvador, Panama, Southwest Asia, Somalia, Haiti and Bosnia will be the operational leaders of the future. They will bring a wealth of experience that encompasses the entire spectrum of warfare. The Depuys and Krulaks of tomorrow must have the vision to look past the fog and friction and apply the correct operational design to the future battlefield. That is when the operational leader becomes the operational artist.

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